



David Hansen ♦ Daily News staff photos

Crew members aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Juniper, from left, Joseph Lopez, Jamie Cashim and Peter Hardy, heave a line to position an outrigger arm Wednesday during oil-spill-recovery training on Narragansett Bay.

# When oil and water mix ...

## Coast Guard crew will be ready

By Sean Flynn  
Daily News staff

Coast Guard Capt. Craig Gilbert was the captain of a buoy tender in Alaska about three years after the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound in 1989.

The Coast Guard helped with that cleanup because the commercial response firms were overwhelmed, and then made sure their crews were ready for the next spill.

"We practiced every year," Gilbert said Wednesday, as he stood on the deck of the Coast

Guard Cutter Juniper in the East Passage of Narragansett Bay between Newport and Jamestown.

The captain was overseeing another training session. He now is the chief for incident management for the Coast Guard's First District, which extends from Sandy Hook, N.J., to Eastport, Maine — more than 2,000 miles of shoreline.

The Juniper, commissioned in 1996, is home-ported in Newport and has a built-in spilled-oil recovery system — part of the legacy of the Exxon Valdez



A fast-sweep oil-containment boom is hoisted during Wednesday's drill onto the deck of the Coast Guard Cutter Juniper.





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Crew members aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Juniper work to lower a floating oil-skimming device into the water surrounded by a fast-sweep oil-containment boom Wednesday during an oil-spill recovery training exercise on Narragansett Bay. The black hose crew members are positioning crosses the deck from the oil-skimming device to an inflatable 25,000-gallon capacity temporary storage device.

## Oil

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oil spill. In the wake of that accident, Congress passed the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 that requires Coast Guard buoy tenders to be equipped with oil-skimming systems and their crews trained to handle them.

Lt. Cmdr. Rick Wester, captain of the Juniper, said the ship has never responded to an oil spill.

"Hopefully, we'll never have to do it," he said. "But if we do, we're ready to go. The motto of the Coast Guard is 'Semper Paratus,' always ready."

About a dozen crew members were on deck for the safety briefing about 8 a.m. They all wore hard hats, safety glasses and hard-toed shoes, as they got ready to put out a 42-foot outrigger arm that pulls a 62-foot U-shaped boom through an oil patch and concentrates the oil during an incident. The oil would then be pumped into an inflatable temporary storage device on the other side of the ship that is called a "bladder." The collected oil would be brought to a recycling or disposal facility.

On Wednesday though, it was just water being pumped from one side of the ship to the bladder on the other side.

Jon Joe Dec, an environmental equipment specialist for the First District, was on the deck with the crew, directing the training session. He's been doing this since 1993, first as a Coast Guardsman, and then as a civilian after he retired "10 years and 16 days" ago.

He said the Coast Guard Cutter Ida Lewis, also based in Newport, responded to an oil spill in Buzzards Bay, off the south coast of Massachusetts, about two years ago. He was in Charleston, S.C., at the time, conducting a

training session. He flew up to New Bedford, Mass., to be on the scene and help direct operations.

He said the Coast Guard augmented and oversaw the cleanup operations that were handled by the contracted environmental cleanup companies.

"We don't compete with the commercial operations on a cleanup," Wester said. "When they get on the scene, we oversee their operations."

"We make sure they have adequate resources," Gilbert said. "They have to get it done."

The First District has eight vessels that can respond to oil spills, although they are becoming less frequent.

Gilbert said increased technical requirements, such as double-hulled tankers, have helped to reduce the number.

"Everyone is also much more proactive about monitoring safety," he said.

There still are incidents, though.

Gilbert said an oil vessel got stuck in the sand near the Jones Inlet, off Long Island, last October. He said the Coast Guard lightened the ship by transferring the oil from the vessel to another one.

Without the oil, the ship could be floated and pulled off the sand.

"Ideally, this would be the outcome of any call we get," he said. "We want to get the vessels home without spilling any oil."

The training session was a break in the routine for the crew, which spends about 70 percent of its operation time tending the 214 buoys in the navigational channels from Cape Cod to New York City. Juniper's sister ship, the Willow, also based in Newport, tends the buoys north of Cape Cod to the Maine Coast.

Lester said a buoy has an average life span of six years. These are very large buoys, each weigh-

ing 12,000 pounds. Juniper's bow is dominated by the large crane that is used to take them out of the water, either for replacement or repairs.

The crew of the Juniper has been converting the 140 buoys that were lighted by incandescent bulbs and powered by batteries to buoys that have light-emitting diodes. These LEDs are much more durable and have vertical solar panels on all four sides that are not easily obstructed or damaged. If there is damage, the self-contained unit is just unbolted from the buoy and a new unit bolted on.

Lester said about 50 percent of the lighted buoys now have LED units and when the conversion is complete, he is hoping less than 50 percent of the crew's time will be spent tending buoys.

That would give the ship more time for other tasks, such as law enforcement in the fishery grounds. The crew boards fishing vessels out at sea and makes sure that fishing regulations and quotas are being observed, and required safety precautions are being followed.

The Juniper can be used for search-and-rescue missions, though these are uncommon for this ship, and for ice-breaking.

The Juniper also is used for migrant interdiction, and these duties may increase in the future, according to crew members. Lester said the cutter expects to be sent to Key West, Fla., for about a month in October and November. Besides conducting patrols, the cutter could also be used as a fueling platform for smaller, faster boats patrolling Caribbean waters.

Lester said the focus of the Coast Guard has been changing since it was moved from the Department of Transportation to the Department of Homeland Security in March 2003.